

Newport County Unified High School
Exploratory Committee
Minutes

6:00 - 7:15 PM – May 7, 2014 – Middletown Public Library

Attendees

Present: **Barbara A. VonVillas**, Middletown Town Council, Chair

Justin S. McLaughlin, Newport City Council, Vice Chair; **Kellie E. DiPalma**, Middletown School Committee; **Sandra J. Flowers**, Newport School Committee; **Naomi L. Neville**, Newport City Council; **William R. O'Connell**, Middletown School Committee; **Robert B. Power**, Newport School Committee; **Marco T. Camacho**, Newport City Council (Alternate)

Not Present: **Richard P. Adams**, Middletown Town Council;

Approval of Minutes

The minutes of April 29, 2014 were reviewed and unanimously approved.

Discussion

Public Information

The committee was informed that the League of Women Voters is willing to conduct an informational forum in June. Discussion centered on the focus of such a forum. It was agreed that it should be informational in providing what is already known and soliciting questions for future public meetings.

For example, there was tentative agreement in previous meetings relative to governance as well as some issues related to funding; however, other issues still needed to be defined more clearly.

The representative of the League had suggested that the committee identify 3 or 4 major items that might be presented in a PowerPoint presentation, and the League could then provide coordination of questions and answers that would increase public knowledge.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Based on the expectation of untimely action by one of the governing bodies, the committee concluded that it should actively and immediately pursue approval for a referendum vote in both communities in November 2014. There was much discussion relative to proposed ballot questions, but the committee determined that a question that was limited to a unified high school had a better chance of gaining council approval, and a single, clear and simple question was favored. There was consensus on the following:

Should Newport and Middletown join together to form a unified high school?

Future Discussions

Following the committee's commitment to propose a ballot question, June 24 was identified as the date to be suggested to the League of Women Voters for a public forum. It was agreed that the focus issues for the forum would be developed at the next meeting of the committee.

Attachments

Newspaper coverage following May 7, 2014 meeting.

Proposed Meetings Calendar

The next meeting has been scheduled at the Newport Public Library on Thursday, May 29th from 6 – 8 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,


Richard Adams

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Newport Daily News

May 8, 2014

SCHOOL UNIFICATION TALKS

Question could go to voters

By Matt Sheley

MIDDLETOWN — Newport and Middletown voters could be asked to chime in on a nonbinding Election Day ballot question whether the two communities should join together for a unified high school.

At a lightly attended Wednesday night meeting at the Middletown Public Library, there was overwhelming consensus among Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee members to take up the matter with their respective councils, although no votes were taken.

Before the matter gets to the Nov. 4 ballot, the Newport and Middletown councils must OK the language of the question, which then has to get the approval of the state General Assembly.

The issue is expected to be discussed at the next meeting of the Middletown council on Monday, May 19, at 7 p.m. in Town Hall. Some at Wednesday night's meeting wondered if it would make it through that gantlet in light of comments earlier in the week from Middletown council Vice President Robert J. Sylvia to cut off conversations with Newport about the joint high school.

"Just catching the sentiment and tone of some of your fellow councilors on the Middletown council, I have to say I'm a little troubled," said Marco T. Camacho, Newport City Council member and exploratory committee alternate to Barbara A. VonVillas, the Middletown councilwoman who is serving as the head of the exploratory committee.

"Basically, what that proposal is is to stifle open dialogue between two communities, to stop us from doing this right here," Camacho said.

"I think there's a silent majority out there of people and you've got the vocal minority and too oftentimes we let the vocal minority run the show," said exploratory committee member Robert B. Power, who serves on the Newport School Committee. "They make a lot of noise and everybody thinks that's what people are really thinking and the silent majority out there really don't believe in that."

Since the beginning of the year, Newport and Middletown officials have been exploring whether it makes sense to combine high schools to save money and offer better educational opportunities to students.

Since the talks started, the board has talked close to a dozen times about ideas, but has not put forward a formal concept.

That appeared to change Wednesday night before an audience of three people, including Camacho.

Concerned about the potential of faltering support from the Middletown council in the wake of Sylvia's comments earlier in the week, the committee seemed focused and determined to get a question before voters in November.

In a free-flowing conversation, committee members pondered and tweaked more than half a dozen proposed ballot questions.

Should it be a straightforward one-line sentence or include a preamble? they wondered. Could power

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adjectives be employed to deliver the message about the need and importance of the item?

Would people be turned off by a question that is too long or didn't offer any explanation about why voters were being asked for input? Is asking for full unification among both school systems too much of a reach?

Ultimately, the committee opted to go for the "short and sweet" approach, coming to general agreement that something along the lines of "Should Newport and Middletown join together to form a unified high school?" was best.

"The objections that we are dealing with at our council level have to do with the fact that we were charged with looking at a unified high school," VonVillas said, acknowledging she was choosing her words carefully.

"You perhaps have seen in the paper a number of times, ups and downs, but the fact is that because we started talking about regionalization, that was used as a wedge to undermine our efforts. If we come back with a question that talks about regionalization, we're dead in the water. But if we stick to what our charge was to begin with, it will get our foot in the door." Should there only be support for a nonbinding question — one that carries no formal weight, whether approved or rejected — her fellow committee members said the group had to start somewhere.

And should the item get approved by voters in Newport and Middletown, they added, it could be a stepping stone for something really special.

"It doesn't mean the discussion can't grow at some point into a regional district," said Naomi L. Neville, Newport City Council vice chairwoman and exploratory committee member.

"If it is implemented and it does go well, people will be asking, 'Let's do the rest of the system too,'" said Kellie E. DiPalma, Middletown School Committee vice chairwoman and committee member. "This could be a first step."

The group also talked about the possibility of scheduling a June 24 public informational forum to provide more details about the idea. The exploratory committee's next meeting is slated for Thursday, May 29, at 6 p.m. at the Newport Public Library.

Newport This Week

May 15, 2014

A Regional School Experience

By Jacquelyn Moorehead, May 2014 URI graduate and new *NTW* contributor

Attending a regional school district was a progressive step in my educational growth. In the spring of 2004, I graduated from Chariho High School. When I arrived as a freshman at college in the fall of that year, I had to explain to my out-of-state classmates that Chariho was not a town in Rhode Island, but rather an acronym for the three towns that made up the small high school. Since 1960, Chariho has opened its doors to residents of Charlestown, Richmond, and Hopkinton. Prior to that, students from those towns attended schools in nearby Westerly and South Kingstown.

Regionalizing the districts became necessary for the same reasons that Newport and Middletown are discussing unification. The towns need a way to save money, and with decreasing population in both school systems, regionalizing seems like a clear option. But now, as then, residents from both towns are cautious about the change.

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When I attended Chariho 40 years after its opening, Charlestown residents were still talking about their children's long commute and possibly leaving the system to start their own school. Even in Newport County, Jamestown students survive the nearly seven-mile ride crossing the bridge to attend North Kingstown High School and Little Compton students travel to Portsmouth High School.

There are 36 school districts in Rhode Island, only four of which are regional or operate with more than one municipality: Foster-Glocester, Bristol-Warren, Exeter-West Greenwich, and Chariho.

The opportunities that regionalizing Chariho afforded the students, residents, and towns were numerous. Learning in a community with individuals from diverse backgrounds taught me to keep an open mind. While shouldering my way through Chariho High's packed hallways, I walked past farmers from Richmond, Native Americans from the Narragansett Reservation in Charlestown, fishermen who dropped their lines off the bridges in Hope Valley, and Career and Tech commuters from nearby towns. Diversity among students created an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance.

One common objection to unification is the loss of rivalry in sports. But only six years after the first students entered the doors of the consolidated Chariho, the baseball team won the statewide championship. Granted, positions may become more competitive and athletes who once had a spot on the team may lose it due to merging teams.

The real winner is expanding education for the students. If Newport and Middletown's proposed merger is similar to Chariho's, channeling efforts to one school could sharpen the educational focus. Chariho High School serves around 1,200 students from grades 9-12, with above-average scores in math and reading in 2014. Scores for the high schools in Newport and Middletown were similar to Chariho's, while both served fewer students. In 2014, the Rogers High School population was only 599 students, while Middletown's was 688.

The belief is that with only one school to focus on, the quality of the staff will improve, and therefore, the learning quality will, too. In my time at Chariho, I learned that an invested teacher could motivate students to learn. The location of the school or the distance students traveled to get there was not as important as the curriculum and staff. With more to gain and not much to lose, my experience as a regional high school student taught me that it's quality, not quantity, that matters in educational systems.

Newport Daily News

May 17, 2014

Voters should decide whether to pursue school unification

By Richard P. Adams, Middletown Town Council member

On Monday, the Middletown Town Council will be asked to approve a nonbinding referendum question for the November ballot: Should Newport and Middletown join together to form a unified high school?

It is important to note what the question does not do if affirmatively answered. It does not mean that the two high schools will be immediately physically combined. Nor does it require a new high school to be built. It does not alter current middle school or elementary school arrangements. Newport's Pell Elementary School and Thompson Middle School are new and will not change. Middletown is now considering a refurbishment and building plan for all our schools. Initially proposed in 2007, the plan is for renovation and repair needed regardless of any unification activity and will proceed, or not, irrespective of high school unification.

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Councilor's Robert Sylvia's May 10 letter linking high school unification with building of a \$140 million school was at best disingenuous. He is correct that a new Middletown High School without unification would be costly.

However, should unification proceed, and it is decided that a new school is needed, the costs would be shared and at least 40 percent funded by the state.

The result would be closer to \$45 million for each community — a great deal of money, but much less than the misleading number cited by Mr. Sylvia.

So, why place this question on the ballot, and why now?

Middletown has a great school system and high school. However, our current financial and demographic state is not sustainable. We are faced with decreasing state aid of at least \$200,000 per year for the next six years and federal impact aid for students from military families will continue to decline. Over the past 25 years, our high school population has gone from about 1,300 to 725. Our town's population is declining and becoming older and although our tax base is increasing, we cannot solve the problems of declining education revenues and population changes by increasing taxes.

Over the past 25 years, Middletown High School has lost about 25 teachers.

While our teachers and school administration have preserved essential curricula and programs, it will be extremely difficult to do so as revenues decline and school population remains stable or falls. The inevitable losers will be our students, both those who are college-bound and those who plan to pursue career-tech training, as available courses and training are eliminated.

Thus, now is the time to ask you, the voters, whether to preserve the status quo or commit ourselves to a cooperative and collaborative future. It's a really big choice which only you should make.

Our Town Council should not suppress your ability to be heard.

Newport Daily News

May 21, 2014

MIDDLETOWN: SCHOOL UNIFICATION TALKS

Voters to be asked opinion on merging with Newport

By Matt Sheley

Middletown will put a nonbinding question on the Election Day ballot asking voters whether to join high schools with Newport, despite loud opposition to that plan at Monday night's Town Council meeting.

In a split vote before a large crowd in Town Hall, council President Christopher T. Semonelli and council members Richard P. Adams, Bruce J. Long and Barbara A. VonVillas voted to place the question on the Nov. 4 ballot. Vice President Robert J. Sylvia and council members Paul M. Rodrigues and M. Theresa Santos voted against the measure.

Town Solicitor Michael W. Miller and Town Clerk Wendy J.W. Marshall will prepare the ballot question for approval by the state legislature.

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Proponents said the question was for purposes of gauging public opinion and should it be shot down, unification should be considered a dead issue.

"I want to know what you think and what everyone out there thinks ...," VonVillas said. "We cannot, us seven people, make a decision that impacts 16,000 people."

On the other hand, opponents said the question set Middletown further down a path it should never have been on to begin with, particularly given the recent success of its schools.

"We are spinning our wheels and wasting our time," Sylvia said, noting a Daily News poll indicating about 70 percent of respondents were against unification and virtually no one he's spoken with favored the idea.

A committee of Newport and Middletown officials has been meeting since the beginning of the year to see if they could find common ground on the issue of unifying high schools.

On several occasions, members of the Middletown council have broached the idea of walking away from the table. But nothing was formally put forward until the previous council meeting on May 5, where Sylvia said the time had come to "put the brakes" on the conversations.

At that meeting, Miller said because the item was not on the council docket, it could not be acted on that evening. At the time, Sylvia pledged to revisit the issue at the next meeting.

Early into the session Monday, Sylvia made a motion to move the item to the front of the agenda because of the large crowd that turned out for the session.

During a testy discussion that followed, including allegations that Long traded his vote on unification to get approval of nonpartisan elections on the ballot (see related story, Page A3), everyone who spoke — minus the four on the council and one audience member — said Middletown would be better off going its own way with its schools.

Among the issues cited were the impact on the town's economy, stifling the success the schools have shown recently and the loss of Middletown Islander pride.

After about an hour and a half of discussion, the council approved the ballot question by a 4-3 vote.

Moments later, controversy erupted about why the term "nonbinding" was not part of the motion that was approved. After more discussion, the council voted by the same 4-3 margin to include that term.

Later, the council voted 4-3 for the Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee to continue its work. The next meeting of the committee is scheduled for Thursday, May 29, at 6 p.m. in Town Hall.

Newport Daily News

May 24, 2014

'Exploratory' is key to talks on unification

By Sandra J. Flowers, Newport School Committee Member

As a preface, my remarks are not necessarily representative of my fellow Newport School Committee members, nor have I conferred with them regarding these comments. I am writing as an educator and a citizen with the interests of the students and taxpayers at heart.

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As a Newport School Committee representative to the Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee, I am compelled to share my thoughts and concerns regarding recent discussion in the press.

When the Newport School Committee was informed about the formation of this group, I asked to be assigned to ensure our system's full involvement in what should be a momentous decision. As regionalization of the Aquidneck Island communities has been explored and discussed for a number of years with little if any consensus among the three municipalities, I truly believed that this ad hoc group could focus on one important issue: providing our students, high school level in particular, with the best possible opportunities that such a collaboration could provide.

It became obvious to me early on in the discussions that two issues were rising to the surface. First, several elected individuals in Middletown were moving forward with plans for a new Middletown High School structure.

What Newport's role in this may be remains questionable, especially since we have just constructed and opened Pell Elementary School. Thompson Middle School was completely refurbished in 2002 — recent, in the grand scheme of things and in a community that still refers to our high school as “the new Rogers.”

As the weeks and months passed, all of us on the exploratory committee concluded that a new Middletown High School was way down the road. Yet combining the two high schools was still considered.

The second issue is one that bothers me more. It involves the squabbles between factions within the Middletown governance that are affecting the progress of the exploratory committee. It has appeared to me during the entire time this group has met that there are some very strong differences among them that are negatively affecting this whole effort.

From the start, I reminded the other members of the committee that “exploratory” was the key word and that looking at the end game of writing referenda and planning the governing structure of a unified school district — without fully consulting both communities — was more than a tad premature. Yes, both communities have representative governments, but it is incumbent upon us to address and consider the opinions and input of those whom we represent.

Several Newporters — voters and politically active individuals — quite emphatically urged me to quit the exploratory committee, as they and others were not, shall we say, enthused about the idea of unification. Just as forcefully, I stated my intention to remain as long as the group was active. I also encouraged friends and acquaintances to express their ideas, both positive and negative, whenever the exploratory committee presents forums for the Newport and Middletown citizens to hear the rationale behind such decisions. I hope that this will occur in a timely fashion.

I respectfully suggest that personal animosities and partisan differences have to be put aside before any kind of practical decisions are going to be made in this area. Our young people — future voters and leaders — are looking to us. What do we want them to see and to emulate?